

Borders a Source of Conflicts in the Borderland Communities of the East African Region. A Case of South Sudan Border (Nimule)

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How to cite this paper: Aleu, A. G. (2025). Borders a Source of Conflicts in the Borderland Communities of the East African Region. A Case of South Sudan Border (Nimule). *Open Journal of Political Science*, 15, 785-795.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2025.154043>

Received: May 17, 2025

Accepted: August 25, 2025

Published: August 28, 2025

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Abstract

Rather than being seen as marginal, as the edges of state control where political, economic and even social systems become diluted and lose coherence, borderlands should be understood as distinctive systems where power, economy and social relations are configured around the border as a central organising principle. This is matched in the research world by methodological nationalism, collection and analysis of data through national prisms rather than regional or borderland prisms. The result is a failure to understand the dynamism, resilience and vulnerability that are features of borderlands. Therefore, this propose study seeks to bring borderlands into the centre of analytic frame by specifically focusing on Nimule Border in South Sudan as a case. This study aims at understanding Borders a Source of Conflicts in the Borderland Communities of the East African Region by looking at South Sudan Border (Nimule) as a case. The study was carried out in three Bomas of Mugali, Jelli and Pageri located in Nimule Border area, South Sudan. Nimule is a border town next to Elegu border in Uganda. A total of 56 research participants were involved in seven (7) FGDs. All the data were audio taped and transcribed verbatim before analysis. The study analysed the role of border a source of conflicts in the borderland communities in Nimule borderland, South Sudan. Data were analysed using latent content analysis, through identifying codes where basis categories were obtained and grouped.

Keywords

Borders, Borderland, community, Nimule, South Sudan and Uganda

1. Introduction

Worldwide, recognition has been growing of the importance of borderlands as stra-

tegic sites of emerging global issues such as irregular population movements, human trafficking, threats of terrorism and extremism and the small arms trade (Feyissa & Hoehne, 2010). These have been worsened by internal and external developments involving a multitude of actors and structures operating at both micro and macro levels.

Borders in East Africa are areas of complex dynamism involving heightened population movement; local cross-border ethnicity and culture; market forces and trade flows; policy activities of multiple levels of governments; and political influences. Mobility may bring groups of people together, increasing the risk of conflict, especially in times of extreme drought when different pastoral groups congregate around the shrinking pastoral resource base (Yasin, 2010). This risk is further intensified when mobility happens in tandem with circulation of guns and ammunition. Some cultural practices have become a cause of conflict (Mahmoud, 2010). The un-demarcated and contested nature of some borders, a case in point being the Elemi Triangle (the area where Uganda, Kenya, and South Sudan meet), combined with the inability of the states to effectively regulate cross-border movement, increases the likelihood of cross-border mobility-initiated conflict (Knighton, 2003). The proliferation of light weapons in the region has increased the incidence and severity of raiding-related violence, as have increasing environmental stresses and the splintering of the Karamojong¹ into rival groups who have come to raid each other, where a generation previously they would not have done so (Knighton, 2003).

Moreover, women and children have become targeted by raids in recent decades. The transformation of the culturally sanctioned, eco-functional raiding, and its commercialisation and the involvement of market actors, is making it more of a violent process. An example of this can be seen in the Karamoja-South Sudan-Turkana triangle, where a disarmament campaign in Uganda was undertaken in the early 2000s as the threat of the Lord's Resistance Army was perceived to have subsided (Iyer et al., 2018). Whereas previously Karamojong had responded to insecurity by amassing themselves into large cattle camps to make raiding more difficult, their fear of being subjected to forced disarmament made them split into smaller groupings, and to "deploy raiding and guns more secretively" (Knighton, 2003).

A recurring feature of many borderland areas is rebel groups mobilising against, and often fighting, with regional and central authorities. The clearest examples are the civil wars in southern Sudan, including the Anyanya war of the 1960s and 1970s; the SPLA/Government of Sudan war of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s; and the recent civil war in South Sudan that has periodically erupted in violence. The Lord's Resistance Army, following their ousting to South Sudan from Uganda in the 1990s, became active proxy agents to the former Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir in Khartoum's fight there, in addition to their fight against the Ugandan government (African Union, 2016). The Somali territories have also experienced violence directed at the Ethiopian Somali Regional State, Ethiopian federal armed

¹Karamojong are the pastoralist community in North Eastern Uganda bordering South Sudan. They are known for cross-border raid within the borderlands of Uganda and South Sudan.

forces, and the Somaliland and Somalia armed forces. In virtually all of these conflicts, the central point of contention relates to the marginalisation of the periphery by the centre, and quest by those living near the borders for greater representation and public services (African Union, 2013).

Recently, in Nimule borderland in South Sudan, traditional cross-border movements were disrupted by the political crisis that engulfed in South Sudan starting in December 2013, which resulted in war wreaking havoc in South Sudan. The influx of refugees from South Sudan to Uganda accelerated from 2016, when people started entering in larger numbers through Nimule. These movements are the latest in a long history of population displacement, both internal to South Sudan and Uganda, and across the border in both directions due to the conflicts that have been fought there over the past four decades.

Rather than being seen as marginal, as the edges of state control where political, economic and even social systems become diluted and lose coherence, borderlands should be understood as distinctive systems where power, economy and social relations are configured around the border as a central organising principle. This is matched in the research world by methodological nationalism, collection and analysis of data through national prisms rather than regional or borderland prisms. The result is a failure to understand the dynamism, resilience and vulnerability that are features of borderlands. Therefore, this propose study seeks to bring borderlands into the centre of analytic frame by specifically focusing on Nimule Border in South Sudan as a case. The proposed study intends to further illustrate how borders are in themselves a source of conflict initiated by mobility and livelihood activities by taking Nimule border as a case to study.

2. Research Justification

The study is intended to contribute to the identification of areas of effective policy interventions, more specifically by the government of South Sudan and more broadly by the regional government. The study comes at a crucial time, when regional efforts to promote free movement across borders are being challenged by concerns about conflict, security and public health risks to keeping borders open. Uganda, in 2020, announced the closure of its borders, placing many refugees in South Sudan at greater risk without an option for fleeing the violence and economic crisis in their home country. More broadly, efforts toward greater integration are threatened by a move towards greater isolation and border control, placing pressure on those living in borderlands whose livelihoods depend on porous borders and relations with people living across national boundaries.

3. Methods

3.1. Study Setting

The study was carried out in the three Bomas² of Mugali, Jelli and Pageri located in Nimule border town in South Sudan. Nimule is a border town next to Elegu in

²Boma is the smallest administrative unit of an area in South Sudan.

Uganda. It has semi urban and rural communities with an estimated population of about 45,000. The population is engaged in various economic and social activities including: pastoralism, border trade and subsistence farming of food crop among others. Recently, when violence erupted again in 2016 in South Sudan, population in the area began experiencing new wave of violence for being a border area. This is the reason for choosing this study sites.

3.2. Study Design

The study employed a qualitative study using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). FGDs and KIIs will be employed to assess the Role of Borders in Perpetuating conflicts and insecurity in the borderland communities in Nimule, South Sudan

3.3. Selection of Study Participants

A total of 56 research participants was involved in seven (7) FGDs with each focus group comprising of eight participants, and they were selected based on their knowledge of the subject matter. The FGDs will be drawn from the community members that included, community elders, Youth, Male and Female Traders and other categories of individuals with a good knowledge of the dynamics related to informal cross-border movements. The study considered participants aged 18 years and above. Two (2) FGDs were conducted with Youths Males and Female; Two (2) FGDs with elderly people (Males and Females); Two (2) FGDs with Traders (Males and Females); and One (1) FGD with mixed group. The research assistants were conducted twelve (12) KIIs with Immigration Officers, local chiefs, Police Officers, local government officials, NGO officials and Clearing agents.

3.4. Data Collection

This research provided an analysis on how Borders are a Source of Conflicts in the Borderland Communities of the East African Region. A case of South Sudan Border (Nimule). The target Bomas of this study were Mugali, Jelli and Pageri—these are the areas with the population that has consistently been experiencing localized mobility-initiated conflict since the eruption of violence in South Sudan in 2016. In each of these Bomas, the research assistants conducted two FGDs to ensure inclusion of rural localities. Data collection took about three months to complete.

Three experienced research assistants were recruited with good working knowledge of English, Arabic and local languages (Madi for Madi, Dinka for Dinka and Acholi for Acholi). Prior to data collection, they will be trained on the study protocols and procedures. The interview and FGDs guides were translated into the local languages and pretested in a similar setting in order to get feedback on questions that are not clear. The researcher also participated in the data collection process by correspondence online. During interviews, we will ask open ended questions followed by targeted questions on predetermined categories. The interview

was guided focus on the **Role of Borders in Perpetuating conflicts and insecurity in the borderland communities in Nimule Border, South Sudan**. The FGDs and KIIs were audio recorded with consent.

3.5. Data Management and Analysis

All the FGDs and KIIs were transcribed verbatim, and those in the local languages were translated without altering the meaning. A conventional content analysis approach was used as described with codes and categories arising from the data. Analysis was done in two stages, first, the manifest content analysis and then the latent content analysis. The transcripts were read and re-read by the authors to achieve immersion. Text data were read to derive codes by highlighting emerging factors based on our understanding of the data. Codes were sorted into categories based on their linkages. The categories were grouped into meaning overarching themes.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Strive to Accumulate Wealth

Traditionally, Dinkas are known as nomads, and they are culturally inclined to the primitive accumulation of wealth. They tend to have a cattle complex. Apart from being valuable for payment of bride price and dowry, cattle are used as a simple of social status. In so doing, cattle are rarely sold; they can only be sold on condition that they are sick. *One participant in an FGD stated: "Owning a kraal of cattle mean in our society, it means you are rich and hard working. It also means blessing. So, your clan and beyond will always have a social regnition and respect"*

Another participant echoed the same statement: "You know, wealth does not just comes. It is those who are wise and hardwork that accumulate cattle wealth, and that why you are regarded highly. It is not easy to achieve this goal."

A community elder also stated "Who in this world likes a poor person. The world belongs to the rich that every man aspires to acquire wealth by all means."

Past studies have confirmed that to fulfil these symbolism and usage of cattle, everyman aspires to have the largest kraal in the community. The number of cattle one has is never enough. Even women are attracted to a man with the largest herd (Feyissa & Hoehne, 2010). Those without any may not only receive insults from their own wives but may also lose them to other men, including their children more so, if bride wealth is not paid. In addition, when an epidemic invades a kraal or the community and wipes away the cattle, seed stocks are obtained through raiding as a traditional practice. A local payam administrator states: *"It is always a tradition amongst the nomads that the fastest way to replace a lost number of cows is through raiding. Raiding is usually conducted by the young energetic warriors and appreciated by elders"*.

Another key informant also echoed the same statement: *"Yeah, cattle raiding by the nomads-all the nomads not Dinka alone— has been practiced for thousands*

of years. It used to be conducted with rudimentary tools such as pangas, spears and arrows. Nowadays, guns are being used. That is why it has become dangerous, many lives get lost in the process, including that of women and children”.

While past studies have confirmed cattle raiding was conducted in the past using pangas, arrows overseen by elders who ensured that woman and children are not killed because life’s sanctity, the emergence of the gunpowder as a raiding tool and the arms race, for example, in the Illemi triangle changed its dynamics and has made it violent. It is on this basis that it has escalated conflict today and there is no more respect for human life (Feyissa & Hoehne, 2010). Children and women are murdered alike fuelling thus the arms race with each group grappling to own the most powerful guns it can in the market. A gun in this era symbolises wealth, power, dominance and security of vast grassing ranges and water (Dereje & Hoehne, 2010). Reminiscing about this, community leaders in Amuru district reflected: *“In addition, if you had a gun, you were a rich man. The gun that was the source of wealth is gone and poverty has come”*. Considering that the Madi and Acholi are disarmed, the pastoralists from South Sudan who are not disarmed are therefore, pushed by the cattle complex and the drive of primitive accumulation to raid and to steal from the cattle owners in Uganda. The district agricultural officer was spot-on when he said: *“They want to increase the number of livestock to get richer than others and for pride.”*

4.2. Proliferation of Small Arms as a Result of the Porosity of Border

The study has indicated that borders, especially porous borders, facilitate movement and circulation of guns and violence. Nimule Border area experience both wet and dry seasons. During dry season, water sources and green pasture lands dry up, and the cattle will have nothing to feed on. One FGD participant state: *“During wets season, there is less violence and confrontation among communities in Nimule borderland areas because of enough water sources and green pasture. Problems comes during dry season because nomads cross that cattle into neighboring Ugandan territories to look for unexploited green pastures and water sources. In the process, the communities from Ugandan side who are mainly agrarian, clash resulting in death of civilians. South Sudanese nomads cross with their guns and use them violently”*.

Another Key informant also reiterated the same statement: *“Borders are porous and nomads from South Sudan’s side smuggle guns into Uganda, where there is gun control, and use them to threaten communities that side whenever they disagreed.”*

As an adaptation mechanism, cattle keepers usually cross to Ugandan side of the border to look for water sources and greener pastures for their cattle, and in doing so, they resort to the tradition of burning grass and violence outside their territory. Since their host communities are disarmed, most disagreements are settled by the pastoralist community using gun power. When rains return, they go

back to their territory in Nimule, reorganise and then return to kill the people they disagreed with and to steal their livestock (World Bank Group, 2020; African Development Bank, 2020). Partly, this is because in the dry season, they will have mapped out locations of cattle kraals to target. Because they are armed, pastoralists also graze of the crop fields of their host communities, harass and or even kill some of them. Reflecting on mobility, men in Elegu noted: *“Cattle keepers are always keen and abserrvant when they enter a new territory. They observe areas of opportunity to raid. Some Ugandans keep cattle. They raid them after mapping their locations”*.

The study finds out that in Nimule borderland, the cattle keepers graze reckless near the crop fields. When confronted, they even kill crop field owners. They also put people at gunpoint and then give them orders: “feed us, give us food or we want money”. In 2017, two men were harvesting wild honey in the escarpment. The nomads ambushed them and slaughtered one of them and ordered the survivor to drink the other’s blood. Supporting this claim, an LC.1 Chair Person for Elegu added: *“When the pastoralists come the problem is that they raid our cattle and kill the people when they are leaving. So as always when we see cattle keepers from South Sudan come some deaths are expected to occur.”*

This is one of the main reasons many of their hosts want their district authorities not to allow the cattle keepers into their area. It is also why the South Sudanese had to be forced to return to their area in South Sudan prematurely last year. To avoid skirmishes too, when the South Sudanese nomads enter their territory, the host community moves away its livestock towards Amuru district and gazettes particular grazing and watering points for their unwelcome visitors.

5. Boundary and Land Disputes

The narratives from the study indicate that in 2020, flood-induced migration of Dinka Bor herders from Jonglei State into the Equatoria region, particularly around Nimule borderland areas, led to heightened tensions and land disputes with local communities. These conflicts were exacerbated by the destruction of crops by cattle and encroachment on hunting grounds. While some herders returned after the floods receded, others remained, creating ongoing tension, especially with the Madi ethnic group who dominate Nimule. One key informant stated: *“We have no problem with Dinkas or any other person living with us here in Nimule, the problem comes when their activity brings a threat to our traditional means of survival. We, the Madi, are not cattle keepers, we are agrarian. We grow crops, and when our crop fields are destroyed, we feel threaten. There where disputes begin that appear to be between Dinka and Madi over land issues.*

Nimule’s strategic position on the border with Uganda has made it vulnerable to multiple conflict dynamics, including those associated with militia formation, cross-border conflict, and the movement of displaced populations. These have occurred alongside rounds of violent conflict linked to attempts at controlling critical parts of the border itself, or the infrastructure connecting Juba to the border

town of Nimule (Lifang, 2018) Social, political and economic re-ordering associated with both periods of war and peace have impacted relations between the Acholi and Ma'di communities, whilst the legacies of wartime displacement—including the displacement of pastoralist communities from Jonglei State to Nimule border area—has created distinctive conflict dynamics following the conclusion of the second Sudanese civil war (1983-2005) (UNHCR Report, 2019; African Development Bank, 2020).

The Ma'di-Dinka Bor conflict built upon tensions concerning the use of land (including the destruction of crops by cattle) and occupation of dwellings by displaced persons; control of local administration (particularly in Nimule), and concerns regarding perceived disparities in representation and influence over decisions made at the national level (Lifang, 2018) In September 2013, the Ma'di paramount chief was killed in Nimule amid disputes relating to land and control of the local government. These issues were further aggravated by the arrival of increased numbers of cattle from Jonglei State (belonging to the Dinka Bor) in the early stages of the recent national conflict (African Union, 2013).

Border issues have also affected the (majority Ma'di) Pageri Payam and the (majority Acholi) Magwi Payam, with these issues becoming linked to wider demands for new administrative units in the county. According to a consultative report by the Inter Church Committee in 2011, the demand for a separate administrative area or “corridor” was particularly strong on the part of the Ma'di community (Radio Tamazuj, 2022). Such demands were not opposed by the Acholi community, provided no future administrative units encroached of land perceived to belong to the Acholi. The Pageri Administrative Area was subsequently established in 2014 and covered majority Ma'di areas in the west of the county, with eastern areas continuing to be administered under the name of Magwi County. The current status of the Pageri Administrative Area is unclear, though the Ma'di community reportedly continue to informally make use of the name. Within the (predominantly Acholi) Magwi Payam, conflict has also occurred over the status of Agoro Boma, in the context of attempts to turn Agoro into its own payam (Radio Tamazuj, 2021).

Additionally, parts of Magwi County's border with Uganda are contested by Acholi communities either side of the border. While a committee has been set up to resolve this dispute, to date there has not been a permanent resolution. SSPDF and UPDF soldiers reportedly clashed in a disputed area to the east of Magwi (Radio Tamazuj, 2022), whilst in mid-2022, the UPDF allegedly made an incursion across the disputed border, resulting in fighting with SSPDF soldiers. The UPDF subsequently withdrew from the area (Radio Tamazuj, 2022).

Because of mobility too, a lot of boundary disputes have sprung in Nimule area. Some of these disputes involve the Dinka, who are the migrant community and the Madi, who are the host community. The dispute has largely been shaped by the mobility of Dinka, who fled war in 1991 from Jonglei State. As a matter of fact, the Dinka Bor came from Duk, Twic East and Bor.

6. Historical Legacy of Conflicts in the Area

The legacy of displacement of mostly Dinka Bor pastoralists from Jonglei during the second Sudanese civil war and associated militarization of the area continues to affect community relations and livelihoods in Nimule. One FGD from Madi stated: *“Community tensions on land issues, cattle issues. For example, Dinka keep cattle and their cows traverse our farms. This has caused tension over and over again. Dinka have come here with cows since 1991, and they have not gone away, and their way of life is not compatible with ours”*.

Another FGD stated: *“SPLA/M Liberation war that took place from 1983 to 2005 was mainly coordinated in Nimjule. Nimujle was a transit for the liberation activities because of its proximity to Uganda, which was offering support to SPLA by then. We haven't recovered from those violence cultures up to date”*.

Another FGD Participant stated: *“There have been mild issues of insecurity in the area. The conflict of 2013 has spilled over to our area. People get anywhere by unknown gunmen. Those cases are common here, and they have caused fear”*.

In early 2022, violence involving parts of the Ma'di and Dinka Bor communities escalated following intermittent conflict between the groups since 2007. The tensions were the subject of a 2020 peace forum that made a number of commitments to ease tension between the Ma'di and Dinka Bor pastoralists, and between the Ma'di and security forces (Radio Tamazuj, 2021).

The Ma'di-Dinka Bor conflict built upon tensions concerning the use of land (including the destruction of crops by cattle) and occupation of dwellings by displaced persons; control of local administration (particularly in Nimule), and concerns regarding perceived disparities in representation and influence over decisions made at the national level (Eye Radio, 2022b).

One elder stated: *“Of course, there is problem of land. The Dinkas have occupied land that is not theirs and when owners attempt to claim their plots back, they face harassment. You see, in 1989, the SPLA who were the rebels by then attacked the area and captured it from the government. Most of the people here were displaced to camps in Adjumani. But Dinkas had their own problem in 1991, where there was split in SPLA/M rebellion, that was between the factions of Dr. John Garang from Bor and that of Dr. Riek Machar from Nuer. Communities attacked each other and people from Bor were displaced to Nimule. They found houses empty, with only graves and MANGO trees. Now, there is problem because the owners of the land want their land back and the occupants, the Dinka are refusing.”*

Another respondent stated: *“You can own a land and some comes to settle on your land. If you thwart their attempt to settle on your land, your face violent resistance. Dinka have occupied plots with Mango trees and they are refusing to leave. This has caused tension ever since”*.

In September 2013, the Ma'di paramount chief was killed in Nimule amid disputes relating to land and control of the local government. These issues were further aggravated by the arrival of increased numbers of cattle from Jonglei State

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In conclusion, protracted conflict in the sites analysed in this study cannot be overlooked. Recent moves towards mobility-friendly policy that is attentive to the changing challenges and needs of borderlands communities should be welcomed and encouraged, however should also be accompanied by mapping of the resourcing and capacity available to implement such policy on the ground. Such mapping exercises could be undertaken alongside needs assessments prior to policy/project roll-out, to identify and address potential gaps early. They could also function as an opportunity for reflecting on lessons learned and how these may apply/differ across borderlands contexts.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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